

## **FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET**

**Meeting Date:** June 7, 2017

**Agenda Item:** Ponessa Ranch Conservation Easement (R7)

**Division:** Wildlife

**Action Needed:** Endorsement

**Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 5 Min

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### **Background**

FWP proposes to purchase a perpetual conservation easement on 14,783 contiguous acres of deeded land north of Miles City. Approximately 90% of the ranch is unfragmented native grasslands and sagebrush grasslands. The area encompasses critical winter range for antelope and mule deer and general sage-grouse range located immediately adjacent to a Core Sage-Grouse Area. Resident, huntable populations of mule deer, antelope, sharp-tailed grouse, and sage-grouse exist on the ranch. A conservation easement would protect and enhance sagebrush grasslands, benefitting wildlife and agriculture, while also increasing public hunting opportunities. The size of the ranch, the short distance from Miles City, and the ease of accessibility via Highway 59 and county roads would make for a popular and convenient public hunting opportunity.

FWP is collaborating with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service to potentially partner on funding for this proposed conservation easement.

### **Public Involvement Process & Results**

FWP has not sought any public comment at this time. Upon endorsement from the Commission, FWP would conduct appropriate analysis, public review processes, and negotiations.

### **Alternatives and Analysis**

Proposed Action: Purchase a conservation easement on the 14,783 acre Ponessa Ranch. FWP would develop a management system to improve wildlife habitat while also securing permanent public access.

No Action alternative: FWP would forgo the opportunity to conserve and enhance valuable wildlife habitats with a willing private land partner. There would be no guarantee of public access to the property

### **Agency Recommendation & Rationale**

To conserve the high resource values and public recreation opportunities on this land, FWP recommends endorsement by the Fish & Wildlife Commission, allowing FWP to proceed with the further development of this opportunity.

### **Proposed Motion**

I move the Fish & Wildlife Commission endorse this conservation easement project, allowing FWP to continue negotiations and to conduct analysis and associated public review.